DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 536 CG 012 484

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TITLE Interventions to Increase Enrollments of Older Adults at a University.
SPONS AGENCY National Retired Teachers Association, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Gerontological Society (29th, New York, N.Y., October, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Continuous Learning; Gerontology; *Nontraditional Students; *Older Adults; *Open Enrollment; Post Secondary Education; Program Descriptions; Student Personnel Services; *Student Recruitment; *Universities

ABSTRACT

In 1973 The Board of Regents of The University of Wisconsin system created the Guest Student Program. In effect, the program opened the doors of the University to all Wisconsin residents aged 62 and over. There were 52 men and 47 women in the final sample, with a mean age of 74.89. The following types of interventions were initiated to aid Guest Students in handling common barriers: (1) ombudspersons were hired; (2) a Guest Student lounge was opened; (3) the University was encouraged to produce and distribute positive and appealing publicity about the program; (4) coffee hours; (5) outreach talks; (6) television coverage; (7) student guides; (8) transportation; and (9) registration changes. A substantial increase in enrollment in the Guest Student Program on the Madison campus for spring semester resulted. The intervention methods listed above could be utilized in the future to encourage more people to use university resources. (JLL)

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INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE ENROLLEMENTS OF OLDER ADULTS AT A UNIVERSITY

BY

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Paper Presented at the 30th annual meetings of the Gerontological Society
San Francisco, California; November 18-22, 1977

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Prepared under a grant from the National Retired Teachers Association/American Association of Retired Persons, Andrus Foundation

CG012484

Adult educators such as Hendrickson (1967), Kent (1964), Eklund (1969), Giordana and Seaman (1968) and Mead (1958) have advocated the need for continued or lifelong learning for many years. In recent years we have seen a tremendous increase in special programs designed for older adults on university campuses throughout the country. Some of these programs lead to academic degrees while others are designed for auditting only.

In 1973, The Board of Regents of The University of Wisconsin system created the Guest Student Program. In effect, the program opened the doors of the university all all Wisconsin residents aged 62 and over. The guidelines of the program were set up so that any resident could register during the second week of classes for courses that were not filled by the regular matriculating student body. An additional guideline was that this program be implemented on a cost free basis at each branch of the university. In other words, the university was not to spend any of its own funds instituting or running the Guest Student Program.

At the University of Wisconsin the "cost-free" aspect of the program was rather strictly adhered to, thus few older people were participating in the program. A grant was written by Beth Trachtenberg and Vivian Wood at the Fay McBeath Institute on Aging and Adult Life designed to identify the barriers at the university which discourage attendance by older adults and to, wherever possible, overcome the identified barriers. The grant was submitted to an funded by the NRTA/AARP Andrus Foundation.

Generating the Sample:

Letters were sent to 50 clubs and associations in Madison serving older adults. These letters explained the purpose of the research project and asked

permission to use their membership lists in order to generate the sample population. Eight of these organizations sent us their lists while many others responded and wished us luck with the research but informed us that the policy was not to lend thier membership lists to anyone. We were able to obtain a sample pool of approximately 4,000 names. A systematic sample of 99 was then generated from this pool.

General Demographic Characteristics of the Sample:

The mean age of the sample was 74.69. The age range was 56-88. There were 52 men and 47 women in the final sample. The marital status of the respondents was as follows: a) 36.3% were married; b) 3% were divorced; and c)44.4% were widowed. The mean years of school was 13.61 which is quite high given the mean age of 75 years.

We recognize that this was not a representative sample of all older adults in Madison, Wisconsin but it did reflect those people who are "joiners" and as such would be most likely to take advantage of the Guest Student Program. In addition to these 99 interviews, we had set up a faculty advisory board and a consumer advisory board. The former was composed of interested faculty members while the latter was composed of active community members who were 62 or older.

The Barriers:

From the information gathered from these three sources we initiated the following interventions: a) hiring four ombudspersons; b) opening a guest student lounge; c) encouraging the university to produce and distribute more positive and appealing publicity about the program; d) coffee hours; e) out-

reach talks; f) television coverage; g) student guides; h) transportation; and i) registration changes.

These nine interventions were initiated in order to dispel some of the fears and stereotypes the sampled respondents had discussed. We gathered from the interviews and the advisory board meetings that: a) many elderly people still feared the university students. This phenomenon seemed to be left over from the anti-war demonstrations that took place on the campus during the late sixties; b) they felt the university was a large, impersonal place; c) the physical layout of the campus was problematic in that many buildings are on a large hill that is difficult to climb, and the rest of the campus is spread out so that one must be quite ambulatory or know that a campus bus system exists which facilitates navigational problems; and furthermore, d) people did not want to take seats away from the young students and they didn't know that the program precluded that possibility. These then are the barriers we thought we could work with and alleviate in order to encourage more participation in the guest student program.

Rather than spend more time on the barriers themselves, let me move on to describe the interventions we initiated which did in fact begin to overcome these barriers. We did see an increase in enrollment during the spring semester which had in the past been the semester when enrollments in the guest student program declined.

The Interventions:

1. The Ombudspersons: One of the first tasks undertaken by the research staff

was the hiring of four persons to share a full-time ombudsperson position. All those interviewed for the job were reluctant to accept the full-time position because they found the time committment objectionable in that it precluded their involvement in other activities. In addition, they questioned their abilities to perform the job adequately both in terms of past training and experience, and their own physical limitations. They also expressed concern about the impact of the salary on the social security benefits they were receiving. They did not want to earn more than was stipulated by the guidelines for receiving social security benefits.

The functions of the ombudspersons was seen as contributing to the building of the image of the university as a place that welcomed older students, as well as to assist older students with any problems they might encounter. The primary activities they engaged in were not only to hlep promote the program in connection with various publicity efforts, but even more important, to make themselves available by serving as the staff for the Guest Student Lounge.

2. The Guest Student Lounge: The Guest Student Lounge was conceived of as a place where Guest Students could meet each other, sit, and relax. It was considered a way to ease the large and impersonal character of the university which many older adults identified as factors which inhibit people from attending. It was hoped that Guest Students would help each other and exchange ideas on what classes they liked and why they liked them. The Lounge was also a place where Guest Students could organize activities for themselves. Students were encouraged to bring brown bag lunches and use the Lounge facilities

as a comfortable, economical place to eat.

Several sites were considered for the Lounge. The site finally selected had several positive features that we hoped would encourage its use by the older adults in the program. The Lounge was within one block of several city bus lines and the campus bus line. Further, public on-street parking, though limited, was available right outside the building, and additional parking was available one block away in a large city parking ramp. The Lounge itself was located on the first floor, which minimized the physical barriers connected with stairways for older adults. The Lounge consisted of two connecting rooms. This added feature was viewed as more conducive to relaxed socializing and more comfortable for small group gatherings than a large one would have been. Finally, it was located in the University Club, which not only offers a cafeteria facility, but also is used by older and retired faculty members.

3. Publicity Materials: The Office of Inter-College Programs (ICP), which administers the Guest Student Program arranged for brochures and posters describing the program to be distributed throughout the city. Brochures should use large print, candid pictures of other older students, and a text that is written in a positive, encouraging tone which portrays a welcome to potential new students.

It was possible, on several occasions, to make use of the mass media through their public service announcements. This allowed publicizing the program at no cost. Most communities afford similar opportunities for

publicity. The data from the 100 interviews reveales that older people make wide use of mass media; nearly 90% of the respondents read at least one newspaper daily, while 96% of the respondents owned both a radio and television.

Newspapers, television and radio are all valuable publicity tools that can be used to reach older adults in the community.

4. Coffee Hour: Approximately 600 invitations were sent to community groups of elderly, to present and past Guest Students, to all interviewees, to community organizations concerned with services to older citizens, to university administrators, and to the two advisory boards already mentioned inviting them to the coffee hour. The coffee hour was held four weeks before registration for the second, or spring semester. It was hosted by the research project staff, the ombudspersons, Student Guide Leaders, and additional personnel from the Faye McBeath Institute on Aging and Adult Life. The coffee hour was held in the University Club which also housed the Guest Student Lounge. Thus Guest Students were not only able to meet other current and potential Guest Students, but also they were able to see where the Guest Student Lounge was located.

A brief program was presented welcoming people to the coffee hour, explained the registration procedure, and provided campus maps and information on the campus bus system. Guest Students were informed about new services such as the Student Guides and the Lounge. The remainder of the coffee hour was an informal gathering that allowed people to mingle and chat with each other. A press release was distributed to all area media. This further

publicized the coffee hour as well as the Guest Student Program.

5. Student Guides: This aspect of the planned changes we initiated was an effort to overcome some of the physical as well as some of the psychological barriers to the use of the university. One of the barriers cited was the sheer size of the university. Not only was it difficult to locate specific buildings, but often there was an added difficulty of finding a specific room in a building with a complicated room numbering system. We were also told by many older adults in the community that perhaps others were "intimidated by the big, impersonal university," and that they felt they might "get lost in the shuffle."

In an attempt to alleviate these problems, we arranged with two graduate students in Social Work to organize a group of volunteer guides. These Student Guides received credit through their aging-related filed instruction coursed. They met the Guest Students during the rigistration procedure, helped them through the registration process, showed them around the campus, took them to their first classes, and generally familiarized them with the campus system.

The guides made several suggestions in evaluating their activities which may be of help in setting up similar programs. Guides should be clearly visible to new Guest Students. In order to assure this visibility their physical presence as well as purpose should be known to the people staffing the registration process so that they can assign or suggest to the students that they make use of the Guides. The Guides themselves should be present at the start of registration so they can help the students through the entire

process. Guides should wear name tags, clearly legible, so that the registration staff as well as the students themselves can read them. These suggestions would provide for more visibility, recogniztion of, and perhaps subsequent use of the Guides.

6. Outreach Talks: Outreach talks had been an established practice for ICP as a vehicle to advertise the existance of and to encourage people to participate in the Guest Student Program. For several years, staff members have attended meetings of various clubs and organizations for older adults in Madison. The change instituted in this procedure during the research project was the inclusion of one of the ombudspersons. Having an age peer of the audience present to say, "I'm attending classes and enjoying myself, you can do it," changed the tone of the presentations, and served to make them more encouraging to the audience of potential new Guest Students.

In an additional outreach work effort, ICP was able to arrange a public service interview with one of the ombudspersons over WHA, the Wisconsin Educational Radio Network. The message of this interview was directed toward older adults in the radio audience hoping to encourage their use of university resources. In the course of the telephone interviews conducted during the spring semester with all the Guest Students, many of the new students mentioned that they had heard about the program on radio or T.V. and in the newspaper, and had decided to try it out for themselves. We therefore feel this additional effort was quite successful.

7. Television Coverage: As a final publicity effort, and one that was quite

effective, the ICP Office was able to arrange for news coverage of the first day of registration. The cameras were set up in the Guest Student Lounge. The resulting newscast was a 90-second spot on the 6:00 p.m. news that included statements by several of the Guest Students, one of the ombudspersons, and action pictures of the students in the lounge, while the interviewer explained the program and how to register for the program. Again, we would encourage such use of mass media resources in other areas. The cost is free, and you can reach a large audience.

8. Transportation: Efforts to intervene in this area were of three types: a) to publicize the low cost and convenience of the campus bus system; b) to attempt to arrange special parking privelages for Guest Students; and c) to arrange for free direct, door-to-door transportation through Independent Living.

Campus maps with bus routes printed on them and bus schedules were given to all new students. Also the existence of a parking lot where a yearly permit could be purchased at a minimum cost was advertised. The lot is located on the western edge of the campus, but it is the beginning of the campus bus route, so getting back and forth from a class to the lot is quite easy, and the cost is 15¢ each way (or $5.00 for a monthly ticket). We were unable to obtain special parking privilages for Guest Students because of the existing overcrowded conditions in the other university parking lots. Independent Living agreed to provide transportation to any Guest Student who requested it. We publicized the existing bus service and parking lot, as well

as arrangements with Independent Living. These services were stressed at the coffee hour, outreach talks, and other publicity efforts.

9. Registration: In response to the feedback we received from current Guest Students as well as from the Consumer Advisory Board regarding the registration procedure, we attempted through ICP to modify the procedure. Most complaints centered around the necessity of obtaining a professor's written permission to audit a class. The Guest Students did not like the process of approaching a professor after the first class, explaining the Guest Student status (if the professor was not familiar with the program), and obtaining his written consent to audity the course. They felt that this called undue attention to themselves and was an altogether intimidating experience.

Having obtained the permission from ICP staff we approached the university administration with the proposal that this requirement be dropped on this campus. Our request was favorably received and a modification of the original requirements was instituted for the spring semester. The modification specifies that an enrollment counselor at ICP can obtain a professor's permission over the phone so that the older student does not have to seek permission in person to audit a class.

Summary of Interventions:

In summary, the interventions chosen focused on the following priorities: a) increasing the target population's (older adults) awareness of and interest in the Guest Student Program; b) publicizing alternatives that would alleviate

the transportation problem(s); c) simplifying the registration procedure; d) altering the campus image so as to appear more receptive to and appropriate for the target population; and e) where possible, alleviating the impact of the physical characteristics of the campus which serve as barriers to people's participation in the program.

Results of Interventions:

Regardless of the causal ordering of our interventions, the result was a substantial increase in enrollment in the Guest Student Program on the Madison campus for the spring semester. The increase from 32 students registered in the fall semester to 58 registered in the spring semester represents an 81% increase. This figure is even more impressive if one considers the enrollment statistics of the other 11 campuses of the University of Wisconsin system. Nine of the remaining campuses experienced a drop in enrollment, from the fall to the spring semester, while only two campuses that also experienced an increase, Parkside and Whitewater, experienced a 13% and 44% increase, respectively. In previous years, there had been a decline in enrollment from the fall to the spring semester on the Madison campus. We are fairly confident in asserting that at least a portion of this increase was due to the efforts of the project itself. This was evidenced in information gathered during the telephone interviews to Guest Students who enrolled for the first time in the spring semester. One of the questions asked during the interview was, "How did you hear about the program?" The responses were:

Responses	Number of People
Through a friend	9
On T.V.	7
In a Newspaper	7
Radio Shows and/or Outreach Talks	2

It seems to us that some of this information could be used in future publicity efforts to encourage more people to use the university resources. Perhaps if people knew why their age peers were attending and what benefits they had accrued, they would be more apt to try it out for themselves.

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